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## DRAMA AND THE ENGLISH COURSE

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In the usual English course a full measure of achievement is not gained because the literature offered is not a well-organized unit. No one would question the value of most of the individual masterpieces studied—he must question, however, the failure to gain working power in any one year over a significant body of literature. Such procedure has the same weakening effect in mental command over large correlated fields that the nibbling habit has over physical nourishment. There is zest for future achievement in the feeling which a pupil gains when he knows a subject well enough to be able to talk about it freely and intelligently; he has the pride and self-confidence of ownership, a good basis for further acquisition. Attempts to give such unity are occasionally found in courses devoted through whole terms to the literature and thought of a comparatively brief period in its relation to contemporary art and social aspects, and in courses devoted to a particular form of literature. Of these the short story and the drama give greatest opportunity for complete development in the high school. The drama in its many facets offers the greater scope for the all-round training the pupil must get aside from his knowledge of the form studied. Fortunately for such a course, the modern drama is one of the most successful and significant forms of the literature of today. In no other form can one find the social thought, the ethical standards, the better class of popular reactions to life more clearly mirrored. This phase alone makes drama especially suitable to stimulating class discussion. More than that, the diversity of modern drama gives room for a vital introduction of poetry and of the classic, romantic, and realistic points of view; in fact, of all the general principles of literature and art which a high-school graduate must know in the large if he is to have power over his further reading, or

even standards of judgment and a vocabulary in which to express them. Finally the drama seems to the pupil so intimately connected with his own life—because of his inherent interest in dramatic expression rather more than because he sees so many plays or “movies”—that he applies the principles gained in drama study much more quickly to his after-experiences than those which he somewhat somnolently hears expressed in connection with other forms.

In the University High School this year a new course in drama has been formulated. It is in part the outcome of the experience of several years in trying to utilize to a high degree of educational effectiveness the universal desire to give “shows.” Students taking this course meet five times a week and receive a year’s credit for Senior English. (Such an arrangement is possible because of the relaxed requirements for entrance to most colleges. Those pupils who are to take eastern college examinations receive special training in the few pieces of required literature not covered by the class as a whole.) Under the new plan every bit of the enthusiasm of the pupil for dramatic expression is made use of, not only along the lines of development of drama-producing groups, but also along those of the English and art-craft courses. The course begins with a rapid though intelligent reading of modern drama. The pupils read a play in two days, but can seldom finish discussing it in less than a week unless the points considered are assigned by the instructor and the discussion is limited to them. Each of these first plays represents a different phase of drama. As soon as the class has become acquainted with the field it is to devote itself to tilling, Richard Burton’s *How to See a Play* or Elizabeth Hunt’s *The Play of Today* is introduced as a textbook and suitable chapters are read in connection with the different plays under discussion. These two books are the most simple and interesting works on the drama for high-school use. The library contains many volumes of the best short plays in English; these are assigned for reading at home on those days when the class is discussing the longer plays already read. By the end of the first six weeks a considerable list is covered. Then the instructor reads others to illustrate the restrictions and possibilities of the one-act form. This feature of

the course leads to the bringing in of plots, each presented before the class by its author and discussed by the class. When each pupil has at last found a suitable plot and aim and decided with the class aid upon the atmosphere to be maintained, he writes his play. These are read by the instructor and the class decides which are worth presentation. The selected plays are then acted informally without memorizing so that the class may suggest improvements before the lines are committed to memory. All through the rehearsals the play is being reconstructed and lines are being added as they are found to be needed. Much of this work is performed "after hours." This year a class of twenty-eight supplied nine plays worth working over in this way.

If the class has the time, one or two productions are made of well-known plays by professional playwrights. Such activity quickens the interest and crystallizes the critical judgment both in writing plays and in studying them in the classroom. Plays are chosen, so far as possible, so that they give no participant a "star" rôle, and so that several boys and girls may have an opportunity for important characterization. If several casts are made up, every person in the class has a chance to take part. For this aim short plays are often more valuable, as they offer a greater variety of "good" parts than does one long one. The duplication of casts is, of course, a drain upon the time of the instructor, but for the class as a whole it is the excellent plan. There are, of course, enough productions so that each cast has a public performance. These various productions may not have the finish possible when the few most facile actors are chosen, but the pupil remains the important factor rather than the production. Attendance of all members of the class for all rehearsals is not always required, but should occur often because each actor sees his faults and virtues in the work of others taking his rôle and is therefore stimulated to do a little more than his best, and because criticism of those not acting is valuable in building up a finished whole.

The plays studied in the course are chosen with three aims in mind other than the primary purpose of providing the pupils with worth-while literature: (1) to give a knowledge of drama forms, (2) to introduce the great world-dramatists, and (3) to illustrate the

history of drama in outline. As the interest in the work is most easily aroused by modern plays and as it is with modern plays that the pupil will have to live, the playwrights of today receive major attention. The following typical modern plays are mentioned as in no way definitive, but as answering needs of the class:

*The Servant in the House*, by Charles Rann Kennedy. A sincere and thoroughly dramatic presentation of the question "If Christ came into our modern life?" Its obvious moral quality is a delight to high-school students. It presents at once the serious comedy as a forum for the discussion of ethical problems.

*Mary Goes First*, by Henry Arthur Jones. A light, clever comedy of manners.

*Cyrano de Bergerac*, by Edmond Rostand. One of the great dramas of swashbuckling romance.

*The Melting Pot*, by Israel Zangwill. An excellent melodrama, portraying vigorously the idea so valuable to pupils, "America the melting-pot of the world."

*You Never Can Tell*, by George Bernard Shaw. An example of the modern comedy of brilliant conversation and stimulating ideas.

*Pelleas and Melisande*, by Maurice Maeterlinck. A play illustrating poignantly the drama of mood.

*The Thunderbolt*, by Sir Arthur Pinero. A remarkable comedy for character-study and significant social satire.

*Strife*, or *The Silver Box*, by John Galsworthy. Studies of the clash of modern social classes; attempts to clarify our vision toward the complex questions arising from conditions today. The character portrayal in these plays gets much attention.

*The Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen. One of the most significant plays in the trend of modern drama, showing the breaking away from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century technique to that of the psychological drama; a play illustrating the "problem" play in the best sense of the word.

Interest in the history of the drama is most easily gained through an appreciation of modern types. After the moderns have been studied for some weeks, the plays of Sheridan and Goldsmith are taken up. *The Rivals* and *She Stoops to Conquer* are selected as most typical of the authors and the spirit of the period. In every case the relation is established between the play and the life and thought of the period. Between the moderns and the mid-eighteenth century there is little in drama in English that is of service to the high-school pupil in his later life. This is likewise

true of the long stretch from Goldsmith to Shakespeare. An explanation of this barren period is attempted by the instructor rather than by students in individual reports or study of a text. The dramatic material of these years may well be left for graduate study. The next plays chosen are perhaps *Macbeth*, the tragedy-in-verse form of earlier days, and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, the pageant-comedy of Elizabeth's day, or *Twelfth Night*, a representative comedy, or both. As these plays are in most college-entrance recipes, a double purpose is achieved by such a choice. The masque form is exemplified by another college-entrance requirement, Milton's *Comus*. The latter becomes, if studied with visualization as a spoken entertainment (and this is the point of view cultivated from the beginning of the course), a highly interesting phase of dramatic literature. Few pupils who simply read the masque realize that by sheer entertainment interest it "held the boards" in professional English theaters almost annually for two hundred years and is still occasionally presented.

After the Shakespeare and Milton study (the two being studied as of approximately the same period because the masque form belongs essentially in the Elizabethan age) *Everyman* is read aloud on the school stage by a group of pupils who have spent a few hours in preparation. This gives a vivid idea of the morality. The concluding work in the history of English drama is a series of reports by several students on English religious drama based partly on Miss Bates's able treatment of the subject, and the reading aloud, by those in the class who did not take part in *Everyman*, of the *Second Shepherd's Play*, *Abraham and Isaac*, *Noah's Flood*, and other miracle plays. If at this time the interest of the pupils is not dulled by the older material, a play of Molière is discussed, perhaps *The Learned Ladies*, and individual reports are made on Molière, Goldoni, the *Commedia dell'arte*, and the growth of Pierrot and Columbine, reports largely from Chatfield-Taylor's two works, *Goldoni* and *Molière*. The last play of this survey is a Greek tragedy, probably Euripides' *Medea*, used in the Murray translation and studied in connection with reports by the pupils upon the growth and phases of the Greek theater; the book most frequently used for these reports is Murray's *Euripides*

and *His Age*. The play is cut and then read with explanations by the instructor.

If at this time there is time for further reading it is devoted to other great figures in modern drama. Two plays of today are taken up at the end of the course so that the relation of the modern drama to its historical background may be doubly impressive. Among the plays which are read at this time and are on the list of reading suggested for the various members of the class are the following:

*The Bonds of Interest*, by Benavente. A recent Spanish version of the old rogue comedy or picaresque romance.

Five plays by Lord Dunsany. These plays represent the new note of fresh virile imagination which is entering modern drama and modern literature.

*The Admirable Crichton*, by J. M. Barrie. An excellent, well-made, modern character comedy.

*Prunella*, by Lawrence Housman. An exquisite modern Pierrot phantasy.

*The Honeymoon*, by Arnold Bennett. A clever modern comedy with clear-cut characterization.

*Milestones*, by Bennett and Knoblauch. A brilliant comedy with a new technique; excellent in character and theme.

*The Squabbles of Chioggia*, by Goldoni. A colloquial comedy of old Italy.

Seven short plays by Lady Gregory. Best modern types of the short form.

*The Younger Generation*, by Stanley Houghton. Successful modern comedy of ideas and character.

*A Thousand Years Ago*, by Percy MacKaye. Oriental phantasy of power and beauty.

*The Piper*, by Josephine Peabody. One of the few poetic dramas of today of real power.

*Swanwhite*, by August Strindberg. An exquisite, virile fairy play.

If the time permits at the end of the course a week is devoted to other literature than drama to see whether the principles of appreciation and technique carry over into new fields, and to show how the same large principles underlie all forms of art. This enlarges the horizon of the pupil perceptibly by making him feel that he has acquired real understanding of far-reaching basic principles.

The written work of the course takes its initiative from other features of the class work. It has considerable variety, though the greater part of it is expository, dealing with subjects upon which

the class has in its recitations (one should say discussions, for of formal recitation there is little) shown tense interest. At the beginning of the course, after considerable attention in class, the pupils write a theme on the somewhat difficult assignment, "Why is a work of art a work of art?" Each pupil chooses not more than five reasons, each of which is developed at length with concrete illustrations. After these have been read and criticized an informal tabulation of the reasons accepted by the class is made as material to be treasured by the class. The next written assignment requires the pupils to apply these same principles to drama and to add what they consider the special elements of worth-while drama. These themes too are read to the class for discussion and for tabulated principles. From this time on the class work or tangent class criticism develops more subjects than can be used. The "movies" give much material. Are the "movies" to be considered art? is a question of real interest, though it may not appeal to the readers as such. Many of the pupils go often to the moving-picture theaters and are eager to justify themselves; the others like to attack the "fans." If after the themes are read the class decides that "movies" are not art, and they usually do when reasons for and against confront them, they are asked to attempt to justify the "movies" on other grounds. This theme in especial usually brings out surprisingly straight thinking. In all assignments of a somewhat abstract character the emphasis is put upon a few ideas, each well developed and illustrated in at least one long paragraph. Reasons not strong enough to be so treated are reserved for class criticism. Reviews of plays read or seen, or points of view differing from those of critics studied, form a considerable portion of the written work. In reviews only a small part of the entire theme may be devoted to the story, and that part must illustrate a point that the reviewer is making. Informal argument arises over discussions of character. Strangely enough some pupils usually are enthusiastic over justifying Mr. Crampton in *You Never Can Tell*, and others are equally ready to prove Shaw wrong in his attitude toward the obligations of children to their parents. *The Doll's House* provokes the query, "Is there an American 'Doll's House'?" or "Is Nora justified in her final decision?" Many short themes



are written on scenes or costumes that the pupils are planning or on theaters or settings that they have seen.

It is taken for granted that Seniors know the mechanism of writing. If a pupil shows weakness in any branch he is given individual attention outside of class so that the majority need not be held back. At the beginning of the year great care is taken to weed out quickly those who have registered for the course but are not clearly fitted to take it. Work of this kind can be pursued to advantage only in a class evenly graded. Many a pupil, however, who has a weak record will put forth redoubled energy and care in order to remain in a class in which so live a subject as modern drama is treated. It is true, too, that the genuine interest of the pupils gives a new thoughtfulness and a surprising accuracy to their work. The amount of unsolicited written work as well as of reading is astonishing. One boy whose written material has been peculiarly slovenly and cramped in other years, is expert in electrical and woodshop work. Now that he is constantly explaining and making stages for the class his themes have become mature and accurate. Another lad who in one week wrote an extra review of a play seen and read two unassigned Ibsen plays was heard to remark in the halls to a fellow-student that the latter should take the drama course, for it was a snap. The speaker had just spent a considerable portion of his Christmas holiday in making an elaborate stage equipped with screens and furniture. At least twice, the second time to put into practice the principles, especially that of proportion, gained from the discussion of the first, pupils retell the story of a play. Even though warned, in the first attempt the pupil will probably not so tell his story that the thread of the main plot will stand out or the last acts get due amount of space. The only other narrative is that contained in the original plots submitted for projected plays. In all the written work the main, though by no means the entire, emphasis is placed upon full, well-rounded thought-development. In the second half of the year time unrelated to the drama work is devoted to effective sentence-construction and to diction.

There is constant work in oral expression, subject always to class criticism. Articles on stagecraft, new plays, playwrights, or new

theater schemes are given in summarized form. Occasionally a theme subject is used for a long talk before the class. In this work the clearness and fulness of the speaker's outline get attention. At least two rather formal talks are made before the class by each pupil. The first is a review of a chapter or article on some phase of dramaturgy. The speaker outlines the author's ideas, emphasizing those points which he thinks most valuable to the class. These he discusses with considerable fulness. At the end he answers any questions of information or argument that the class may ask. Such talks average fifteen to twenty minutes in length. Through them several books on the drama are covered with interest and intelligence. William Archer's *Playmaking*, assigned to the more able students, is thus brought before the class in its entirety, though it is too difficult for a general textbook. The second formal talk is the presentation of the life, the work, and a critical valuation of a single dramatist. The subjects for this effort are assigned early in the year, though the talk is not given for some months. Liberal excerpts are read from the works of the playwright treated to illustrate points made, and bibliographical references are carefully given. The talks usually last, with the discussion following, for at least one full period.

A few times during the year, when particularly suitable plays are being presented in the city, the class is asked to attend them. As soon as all have seen a play the pupils bring the criticisms of it from the daily papers, which they have been asked to save, and the various points of view are discussed. In this way the pupils become acquainted with the caliber of the various local critics and are led to formulate standards for dramatic criticism. Later each pupil writes criticisms of the plays he sees. Whenever a pupil has attended a new performance of any merit he gives the class his opinion of it and his advice as to whether the others should see it. It is required of the speakers that they develop their points with concrete examples. This questioning of one's own standards of enjoyment usually awakens the pupil to a new valuation of his recreation. In connection with this same phase of the work magazine criticism of the play seen can often be found. Through this the reliable critics of the country are discovered and the class comes

easily to know where to look for information and advice about the theaters. Unfortunately, so far as the value of magazines is concerned, the effective criticism is not found in the periodicals most helpful in general to the pupils. The work of Clayton Hamilton and of Walter Pritchard Eaton is especially worth while to the youthful theater enthusiast.

Young people as a rule have no sincere standards of their own regarding theater-going, nor indeed regarding their reading. What standards they may profess are usually the artificial ones adopted from, or forced upon them by, their instructors and parents. Such young people are, however, peculiarly sensitive to ridicule. If the ridicule comes in book form it loses its unpleasant personal tone, but leaves its principle all the more clearly impressed. As a consequence, such a book as that of George Jean Nathan, the New York reviewer, *Another Book on the Theatre*, though for mature consumption and perhaps of no great worth, can be used effectively in the classroom. His parodies and burlesques of the cheaper forms of modern entertainment occasionally read to the class by the instructor are productive of both merriment and serious thought. Little work done in the class has accomplished in the time given it so much toward giving the pupil standards. In a similar way some of Stephen Leacock's humorous skits invite classroom use.

Educational associations are making a valiant effort to improve the long-neglected American speaking voice. A successful experiment in the drama class indicates one way toward progress. Before a play is put into rehearsal, when interest is especially intense, each pupil is asked to prepare for reading before the class a passage which can be obtained in phonographic records. After several pupils have read the selection and been criticized by the class, the record is played. Then comparisons are made between the professional and the student reading. Later other students read, then the class reads with the phonograph once or twice, and finally individuals read with it. During the ensuing weeks from time to time other similar exercises are undertaken. The records at present available are not wholly satisfactory, though they are very helpful; the talking-machine companies are, however, planning new ones made by actors whose diction sets the standard of American speech.

In these lessons the class is always tensely alert and thus ready to receive permanent impressions. They see at once their failure to grasp the author's full idea and intention, or their ineffectiveness in giving to the listeners his idea with its proper subordinations of thought; they thus gain a new sense of the value of idea-emphasis by word-emphasis. And they really comprehend, often for the first time, the power and beauty of rhythmic phrasing, whether in everyday prose or in verse. Here the need of slow, clear enunciation, of distinct syllables, and the use of pause gain a new dignity in their minds.

The physical equipment for such a course as has been described need not be great, though it should contain certain elements, notably a stage with a frontage of at least sixteen feet, a set of screens, and an adequate lighting system. Preferably the stage should be in the classroom, now a workroom, for much of the discussion can be illustrated by concrete examples, and the pupils will come to consider the stage work as part of their daily experience and not a sensational adventure. There is too a camaraderie and an actual unity of purpose in a class working under such conditions that is difficult to maintain in the formal classroom and the formal audience hall. In any case the theater room should not be large, at the maximum seating less than five hundred people; in a large hall all the naturalness and simple sincerity quickly vanish. There is a world of difference in educational value between the work which is the natural result of classroom effort and the occasionally excellent *tour de force* arising from the excitement of a single production.

The usual scenery in high-school presentations is artistically shocking; a cheaply painted outdoor set, suggesting in its traceries the lace of a bedraggled petticoat rather than God's own trees, and an indoor set which a doll's house would put to shame. As an inexpensive substitute for these the writer has successfully used nine screens. These are made five feet wide by ten feet high, of a light frame covered on both sides with burlap, one side in a dark smoke-blue and the other in a putty color. They can be attached to one another easily, and so attached will stand solidly if set at a slight angle. One screen has an arched opening which is readily converted into a heavy door of the same burlap, or into a French

door, or into a lattice window. If other entrances are needed they are supplied by openings between the screens. Such screens can be purchased from any carpenter for one hundred to one hundred and fifty dollars, or can be made in the school shops.

Most stages are equipped with overhead lights and footlights. Neither is indispensable, though both aid. What one must have are at least two strong movable lights, preferably those known as bunch lights, and strip lights. With these and a few gelatine color slides, red, blue, and amber, which cost about fifty cents each, one can throw the lights from any angle and get most delicate *nuances* of color. A system of dimmers by which each light can be turned on or off gradually is not a necessity, but a very great aid to varied effects. The electric equipment should not cost more than one hundred and fifty dollars even in large cities. The cost of the apparatus itself is a fraction of this figure; it is the installation which increases the expense.

An alert class, stimulated by magazine pictures of the best staging of the modern school, such as that of Gordon Craig, Max Reinhardt, Granville Barker, Robert Jones, or Raymond Johnson, will work out, under direction, settings of surprising freshness and beauty. They must be impressed at the outset, however, with the first principle of modern staging, that there can be nothing on the stage not significant in the tone, or period, or action of the play. In such simple staging every detail must convey the impression desired. A class was recently confronted with the necessity of presenting a goose girl with her geese in the garden of a princess. This was a poser. At last a solution was reached. At one side of the proscenium arch a silhouette tree branch of beaver board swept gracefully downward and across two-thirds of the arch. This was balanced by a silhouette tree trunk on the other side at the back between two screens. A formal wall was indicated by rectangles of beaver board with an opening between, on each side of which were small, highly conventionalized bay trees of beaver board, indicating the entrance to the palace. The geese? They appeared as a cream-white dado about the screens. In this case, as in most cases, the neutral color of the screens became mere distance or background. The audience was not conscious of them, for they

served merely as a means of emphasizing the significance of the properties.

A king's walled garden was ably suggested by placing against the blue screens: (1) a white statue (from the art department) on a long packing-box painted white, the whole set between two small fir trees at the back; (2) two white pillars for the gateway at an entrance between screens at one rear corner; (3) a long white packing-box bench with a small fir tree at each end; (4) a flight of steps at the other front end, the steps placed at the side near the foot-lights, receding behind the curtain. A few window boxes from the various classrooms formed a low border of greenery along the base of the screens. The steps, bench, and pillars were made for a few dollars by the boys in the school shops. If screens are not to be secured, similar effects can be obtained against a permanent hanging of fulled drapery. This should hang from rods above the line of vision of the spectators, should cover the three walls of the stage completely, should be made in separate sections to permit entrance from any point, and should move easily on the rods. Amateurs who use draperies often fail utterly because the drapery is allowed to become mussy or spotted. Such a setting requires absolute neatness and accuracy and a greater significance and conventionalization of the properties than does any other type. A safe color for the draperies is a warm gray, as this takes colored light effects easily.

The habit of enjoyable reading of plays requires a visualization which nearly all pupils possess, though it is perhaps latent. This power, which is a powerful asset in almost every form of reading, can be stimulated by arousing in the pupils a feeling for stage settings. The play becomes a living reality if they see the characters moving vividly across a realized background. Thus settings for scenes read receive considerable attention, and usually without definite assignment pupils bring in their ideas. Since the planning or discussing of a setting necessitates the closest attention to the underlying mood of the scene as well as to the physical needs of the actors, one of the aims of the instructor is gained without artificial effort on his part: the pupil must know his play or he is "out of it" as far as scenery is concerned. The ability to sense the accurate

atmosphere of reading-matter—poem, essay, drama, or editorial—is a valuable asset. The work in settings, of course, lends real assistance to the graphic-art department in vitalizing and freshening the attitude of the pupils toward their work. In the present course settings for the plays to be produced are discussed both in the drama class and in the art classes, and those pupils who are in both departments form an informal committee to transfer ideas back and forth, the art department carrying the ideas into execution. This same relationship is maintained between the drama class and the costume-design class, the latter shaping its course toward the planning and purchasing of materials and the making of the costumes needed. Similar co-operation is entered into with the shops and the music department when aid is needed. Each element is considered by the class in its relation to a real unity in the production.

To further the interest of the pupils in settings and to give initial information needed to support such interest, early in the year a "gallery committee" is appointed. This group receives and mounts on large cards of a uniform size all scene, stage, theater, and costume designs of significance which the pupils can find. No pictures of actors or actresses are included unless in some way they represent a pertinent phase of artistic stage production. In late years the better class of illustrated magazines has printed much valuable material of this kind. Colored covers and other decorative materials not intended for the stage are often stimulating. As this gallery continues through the years it should form a collection of interest far beyond the school precincts.

Another branch of class activity allied closely to the gallery is the making of small stages. Each pupil at the beginning of the second term builds for himself a stage. These are usually made from packing boxes mounted on legs and painted. A pasteboard proscenium arch hides the intimate workings behind the scenes. The stage is set with screens or draperies. Later each pupil reads a different play and makes a setting suited to it. The rivalry in this undertaking is provocative of remarkable results. One boy interested in electricity and lighting effects made a Fortuny dome stage and equipped it electrically for demonstrations before the

class. When the class progress permits the time, stories are written suited to production as puppet plays or shadow plays. After the work has been done on modern stages the class is sufficiently familiar with this *métier* that it can visualize at once historic types of stages, the Elizabethan, the middle-Italian, and the Grecian, and can discuss intelligently the advantages and disadvantages of each and its relation to the type of play presented. Occasionally pupils interested in "making things" attempt miniature reproductions of each of the types studied.

At the end of the course the pupils have been concerned in a practical application of all the arts and crafts of the school; they have had considerable experience in presenting effectively before the class material which they have themselves organized; they have spent many hours in creative work ending in an approach to professional fruition; they have read several volumes of solid critical writing; they have studied twelve plays in class and have read at least twenty more; they have held live discussions on many of the vital problems of the day; they have formed standards for the appreciation of all the arts; and they have gone a long way toward the mastery of the technique, not only of reading and writing drama, but of rapid, intelligent reading of all types of literature.